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THE FIRST TIME I ate someone’s grief, it was an accident.

My aunt had just died, and my cousin couldn’t stop crying at the funeral. She clutched her mother’s wedding ring so tight her knuckles grew white. When she hugged me, she pressed the ring into my palm.

“I can’t look at it anymore,” she said. “Just take it away.”

I slipped it into my pocket, and something strange happened on the drive home. A warm sensation spread through my gut, like I’d swallowed a shot of good whiskey.

By the time I parked in my driveway, I felt freaking amazing—light, almost euphoric.

Meanwhile, my cousin called to thank me. She'd finally slept through the night. "It's like a weight lifted," she said.

I didn't make the connection until two weeks later. I was stress-eating a gas station cherry cupcake—the kind with that nuclear-red icing that stains everything it touches. The ring remained in my pocket, and when I pulled it out to look at it, some of that sticky icing smeared across the metal. Without thinking, I licked it clean, and when

the ring touched my tongue, it dissolved, melting like cotton candy while that same warmth flooded my system, only stronger this time. Much stronger.

That’s when I understood what had happened. Somehow, I ate her grief.

Five years passed, and I turned it into a business. Not officially, of course. You can’t exactly put “Grief Eater” on a business card. But word spread among the desperate.

The process was simple. Bring me something that connects you to your dead loved one. Something that holds your pain. I consume it,

and your grief disappears. I charged based on the intensity—a thousand for a parent, five hundred for a sibling, two-fifty for a grandparent. Pets were a flat hundred. The pricing wasn’t based on science, but on how much the grief would screw me up afterwards.

But I didn’t tell my clients what happened to their grief afterward. It didn’t disappear. It lived inside me. I’d consumed the emotional trauma of seventy-eight dead loved ones, and each one had left something behind—a whisper, an itch, a memory—that wasn’t mine.

I called them the Chorus.

Most days, I could handle them. They were just background noise, the mental equivalent of a TV left on in another room. But lately, they'd been getting louder. More demanding. The whispers had become conversations. Conversations had escalated into arguments. Pleas had replaced the arguments.

Let us out. Let us see them. We miss them.

I ignored them and kept eating. The warmth that followed consuming grief had become addictive, better than any drug I'd

tried. And I’d tried plenty. The business was just an excuse to keep feeling that rush.

Ever since I was a kid, I’d had the same recurring nightmare—being trapped inside my body, conscious but unable to move or speak, while something else controlled me from within. I’d wake up screaming, drenched in sweat, grateful to be back in control. As I got older, the nightmares became less frequent, but more intense. The idea of being reduced to a passenger in my own flesh terrified me more than death itself. I’d rather cease to exist than exist as a prisoner inside my body.

I never connected these nightmares to my new profession. Never saw the warning signs. Until it was too late.

On a rainy Tuesday, a woman brought me her brother’s baseball cap. He’d killed himself three months ago, and she hadn’t slept well since. She passed me the cap with trembling hands.

“Will it hurt?” she asked, her fingers still gripping the frayed edge.

“Not you,” I said.

When she left, I locked the door and stuffed the cap into my mouth. The fabric dissolved against my

tongue, releasing a bitter wave of sorrow that made my eyes water. I chewed faster. The sooner I got it down, the sooner the pain transformed into that familiar warmth.

Except this time, something different happened.

As the last threads disappeared down my throat, I heard a man’s voice, clear as day, say, *“Finally.”*

And then my hands weren’t my hands anymore.

I tried to move them, but they stayed flat on the desk. I tried to stand, but my legs ignored me. My

breathing sped up, but I wasn’t the one speeding it up.

“You’ve been so selfish,” the voice said. *“Keeping us all in here. Not letting us reach them.”*

I tried to respond, but my mouth wouldn’t open. Panic crawled up my spine as I realized what was happening. I was still here, still conscious, but I wasn’t in control anymore. I was a passenger in my own body.

My lifelong nightmare was unfolding in real time. The terror I’d woken from a hundred times was now my waking reality.

“It’s our turn now,” another voice in my head said. A woman’s voice, elderly, unfamiliar. *“You’ve kept us quiet long enough.”*

The next few hours were a blur of psychological torture. My body moved without my permission. My hands opened drawers, searched through files, and found my client list. My mouth formed words that weren’t mine, practicing different voices, different cadences. The Chorus was figuring out how to drive.

They let me surface just enough to feel the full horror of my situation. I screamed, but they pushed me

back down into the darkness. The claustrophobia of being caged inside my skull was worse than any physical pain I’d ever experienced—like being buried alive but still able to watch the world through a window.

By nightfall, they had a plan.

I woke up on my kitchen floor surrounded by shattered glass. The clock said 3:47 AM. I’d lost nine hours.

My phone showed seventeen missed calls from unknown numbers. There was blood under my fingernails, and my mouth tasted like copper and salt. When I

tried to stand, the world tilted sideways.

“What the hell?” I said, but the words felt wrong in my mouth, like my tongue had forgotten how to shape them.

“We’ve been waiting for this,” a voice that wasn’t mine said. It was coming from inside my head, but it wasn’t a thought. It was someone else. Someone new. *“For someone who could hold enough of us.”*

I stumbled to the bathroom and flipped on the light. In the mirror, my face looked wrong. My expressions weren’t mine. My eyes focused and unfocused, as if

someone else was controlling them.

“No,” I said. “This isn’t happening.”

“Oh, but it is,” the voice replied. *“You’ve been so generous, making space for us. And now we’re going to return the favor.”*

My hand rose to my face, but I wasn’t the one moving it. I tried to scream, but my lips stayed sealed.

My worst nightmare had always been this: losing control. Being trapped inside while someone else drove. And now it was happening. This wasn’t a metaphor or an exaggeration—this was the literal manifestation of the terror that had

haunted my sleep since childhood, come to life in the waking world.

“Don’t fight it,” whispered another voice, a woman’s this time. *“You’ll just make it worse.”*

And suddenly, the Chorus wasn’t background noise anymore. They were front and center, rising like a flood, and I was drowning in them.

They took my body out for a test drive, and I remained conscious for every terrible moment of it. I saw everything through my eyes, but I was just a passenger now. They used my voice to talk to each other, arguing over who got control next.

“The brother should go first,” said my mouth in a voice that wasn’t mine. “He’s the newest. He hasn’t seen his sister yet.”

My head nodded without my permission.

“Fifteen minutes each,” said another voice using my vocal cords. “Until we figure out a better system.”

They were dividing me up like I was a time share property. And there was nothing I could do but watch.

The suffocating horror of being reduced to an observer in your own life is impossible to describe to

someone who hasn’t experienced it.

My body drove to the woman’s house, the one who brought me her brother’s cap yesterday. The Chorus knew where she lived because her brother knew. They rang the doorbell.

When she answered, her face transformed from confusion to terror.

“Tommy?” she said.

“Hey, sis,” my mouth said in her brother’s voice. “I’m back.”

She backed away, shaking her head. “No. You’re that person—the

one who took the cap. What are you doing?”

“It’s complicated,” my mouth said. “But I needed to see you. To tell you, it wasn’t your fault.”

They were using me like a puppet, and I couldn’t even scream. Every childhood fear of possession, every adult anxiety about losing autonomy—it was all playing out in high definition. This wasn’t just a nightmare; it was the nightmare that defined me.

The woman was crying now. “This isn’t funny. You need to leave.”

“Remember that summer at Lake Michigan? When I pushed you off

the dock and you lost your new sunglasses? I said a fish took them."

Her face went pale. "Nobody knew about that."

"I did. I do." My hand reached out to touch her face. "I need you to do something for me now."

"What?" she whispered.

"I need you to give him something else. Something with more grief in it. My journal. It's under the mattress."

No! I screamed inside my mind. *Don't listen to him!*

But of course, she couldn’t hear me. Nobody could. I sat trapped in the passenger seat of my body, watching as they used me to collect more grief, more memories, more souls to add to the Chorus.

Over the next three days, they visited seven of my clients. Each time, the newest member of the Chorus took control to convince their loved ones to hand over more grief-soaked items. Some were suspicious, but most were so desperate to believe they were communicating with their dead that they did whatever we asked.

The pattern remained the same. My body would show up unannounced. My voice would say things only the dead person could know. My hands would take whatever they offered—journals, photographs, wedding rings, even clothing. And then my mouth would consume them, adding each new voice to the Chorus.

With each new object I consumed against my will, the Chorus grew stronger. I felt myself shrinking, compressed into a smaller and smaller corner of my mind. The nightmare was consuming me, becoming more real with each passing hour. By the fourth day, I

only got control for minutes at a time, usually when they were sleeping.

During these brief windows, I tried everything to fight back—pain, alcohol, even smashing my head against the wall. Nothing worked. They just laughed and took back control, their voices overlapping in a discord of mockery.

The only time they let me surface was when they needed me to know something. Like tonight, as my body lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling with eyes that no longer belonged to me.

“We’re going to the cemetery tomorrow,” explained the first voice, my cousin’s mother. *“We’ve decided it’s time to expand our operation.”*

“What do you mean?” I thought at them.

“Fresh grief is the sweetest,” said another voice. *“We’re going to find those in mourning and offer our services directly.”*

“No,” I thought. *“I won’t let you.”*

They laughed, a cacophony of unique tones all using my vocal cords. *“You don’t have a choice anymore. You’re just the vessel now.”*

And I realized they were right. I'd been so focused on fighting for control that I hadn't considered the alternative. Maybe I couldn't drive anymore, but I could still crash the car.

While they debated their plans, I reached deep inside myself, to the place where my own grief lived. Not their grief—mine. The pain I'd been running from my whole life.

I found the memory of my father's death—the overdose I discovered when I was fourteen. My mother's suicide two years later. The friend who died in my apartment while I was out buying more drugs for us.

All the grief I’d never processed, never acknowledged, never consumed.

I pulled it up like poison from a well, and before the Chorus realized what I was doing, I turned it on them.

Grief is a living thing. It grows, changes, evolves. And when you feed it, it gets stronger.

My grief flooded through the mental space the Chorus occupied. As the grief-feeding entities touched them, they screamed—entities unfamiliar with grief themselves. They’d only been the echoes, the impressions left

behind. Never had they been the source.

“Stop!” they shrieked as my grief engulfed them.

“You wanted grief,” I told them. *“Here it is. All you can eat.”*

I forced every painful memory through my consciousness—every loss, every regret, every moment of despair I’d ever experienced. I’d spent my life running from these feelings, but now I embraced them. They were my weapons.

The Chorus splintered under the assault. Some voices faded altogether. Others fragmented into whispers. A few of the strongest

pushed back, trying to regain control, but the assault weakened them.

For the first time in days, I moved my hand when I wanted to. I dragged myself to the bathroom, teeth clenched against the battle still raging in my mind. In the mirror, my face was gaunt, eyes bloodshot. I looked like I’d aged a decade.

But they were my eyes again. At least for now.

“This isn’t over,” hissed one of the remaining voices. *“We’ll wait. We’ll grow stronger again.”*

“No,” I said aloud, my voice hoarse but my own. “You won’t.”

I opened the medicine cabinet and removed a pocket knife. The one my grandfather gave me before he died. The one object I’d never consumed despite its grief potential, because it was too precious.

I put it in my mouth.

Cold metal touched my tongue. I bit down, feeling it dissolve. But this time, instead of swallowing the grief, I focused on my grandfather’s love. The pride in his eyes when he gave me this knife. How he taught me to whittle.

Wonderful memories accompanied the pain.

The knife dissolved into a burst of emotion—not just grief, but joy, love, pride, nostalgia.

And I realized my mistake all these years. Grief? It’s not the pain that destroys you. It’s all that love suddenly homeless, pounding on your ribcage, demanding somewhere to exist. And by consuming only the pain, I’d been creating these hungry ghosts, these fragments of people composed of sorrow.

I opened my mouth, ready to tell them this revelation, but there was

no response. The Chorus had gone silent.

For now, at least.

The next morning, I purged my apartment of all the grief-objects I'd collected over the years. Not by eating them—I'd never do that again—but by returning them to the families they belonged to. Some people were angry when I showed up at their doors. Others were confused. A few even begged me to take their grief back. I couldn't. I wouldn't.

Each returned object lifted a weight from me. With every tearful conversation, every awkward

explanation, every apology, the voices in my head grew fainter. Not gone completely—I could still hear them sometimes, especially at night—but more like memories than invaders.

I thought of them not as the people they once were, but as wounds that needed healing—both theirs and mine.

For the first time in months, I slept without the old nightmare. The terror of being trapped in my own body had lost its power over me, not because it wasn’t frightening anymore, but because I’d lived through the real thing and

survived. I’d faced my worst fear and come out the other side.

I stopped taking clients, moved to a different neighborhood, and changed my phone number. But people still found me, desperate for relief from their pain. Instead of eating their grief, I listened to their stories. Sometimes that was enough. Sometimes it wasn’t. But it was honest work, at least.

A week after my liberation, a man brought me his daughter’s teddy bear. Cancer. She was seven.

“Can you take it away?” he asked, tears streaming down his face. “I can’t live with this pain.”

I sat with him for hours as he talked about her. Her favorite ice cream flavor. The way she insisted on wearing mismatched socks. How brave she was at the end.

Before he left, I told him the truth, that grief is just love with nowhere to go. That the pain he felt was the other side of how much he loved her. That healing doesn’t mean forgetting.

“Keep the bear,” I said. “She loved it, and you loved her. Let it hurt for now. Eventually, it’ll hurt less, but you’ll still have the love.”

As he walked away clutching the bear, I felt something shift inside

me. A few more voices in the Chorus faded, replaced by a peaceful silence.

I still don’t know exactly what I am or how this strange ability works. But I know what I’m not anymore.

I’m not a grief eater. I’m just someone who’s learning, finally, to digest my own.